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**“I have to hear them before I hear myself”: Developing therapeutic conversations in
British counselling students**

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Abstract

Transcripts of interviews from six students who had just completed a one-year postgraduate certificate in counselling skills were subjected to a qualitative analysis that focused on their accounts of the therapeutic action of talking and listening. The course offered a dialogue between psychodynamic and person-centred theoretical orientations. Interpretative phenomenological analysis, the methodology employed to make sense of their experience, offers a dialogue between interpretative and phenomenological philosophical stances, thus mirroring the task faced by the students. Three themes with associated subthemes were surfaced: (1) *Therapeutic openness* captured the students' understandings of how the phenomenological principle of openness is experienced in practice; (2) *Hearing beyond discourse* reflected how their listening deepened during the course; (3) *Presence* reflected the changing quality of the encounter between the self and the other. These findings reflect British counselling students' lived experiences of listening and talking in their developing practice. We connect these results to broader themes of theory and research into the role of language in therapeutic conversations.

Keywords: dialogue, discourse, listening, openness, phenomenology, presence

“I have to hear them before I hear myself”: Developing Therapeutic Conversations in British Counselling Students

An essential part of counselling is listening, and the nature of what is being learned, developed, or unlearned in the development of therapeutic conversations is the focus of the present paper. Cayne and Loewenthal (2007) described listening as the art of unknowing, foregrounding the ineffable, intangible part of the phenomenon that is irreducible to techniques. This paper extends a previous study of counselling students' lived experiences of their listening development as part of their counselling education (Authors removed for blind review). The strongest theme to emerge from that study was 'Learning to hear the self' which captured the students' developing awareness of self while listening to others. The first author was engaged in a different training modality at the time of the study. Following completion of training my interest in otherness and difference re-surfaced in practice and supervision, and this led us back to re-examine the transcripts with a particular focus on the students' accounts of hearing the 'other' in the therapeutic dialogue. These accounts, often rich in imagery, stood-out once the theme of 'hearing the self' was bracketed in the re-examination (Fischer, 2009). What a counsellor and client are doing together through listening and talking goes to the heart of debates on medical model versus existential-humanistic understandings of the talking cure, and these debates continue to challenge the mental health profession in the UK (e.g. Cooper, 2004; Layard, 2005; Vassilev & Pilgrim, 2007). The present paper reviews briefly some philosophical traditions which have underpinned our understandings of what is at the core of the therapeutic in the talking therapies, before going on to present the themes from the students' interviews. In accordance with our epistemological commitment to the phenomenological approach, we devote the bulk of our paper to a rich and detailed account of the students' lived experiences and have surfaced themes to capture these.

Ricoeur's (1974) critique of Freud, from the continental philosophical tradition, argued that therapeutic dialogues are special, hybrid discourses that inter-weave discourses of causes and effects with discourses of desire and frustration. He said that consciousness is not a 'given' but a problem and task, and that 'the genuine cogito must be gained through the false cogitos which mask it' (Ricoeur, 1974, p.161). Genuine consciousness is a constant work and a tarrying between authentic and inauthentic being, never achieving a final state. Qualitative research that offers a conceptualisation of the work of talking and listening has drawn mainly from social constructionist approaches that offer a language-based analysis of the therapeutic process (e.g. see Georgaca and Avdi, 2009). The prioritisation of the linguistic and the voiced, however, has been critiqued as limiting a more complex understanding of the pre-reflective, unspoken and unspeakable aspects of therapeutic encounters (e.g. Adams, 2010; Burkitt, 2010; Mair, 2000). Sympathetic with the continental philosophical tradition, Owen's (1991) account of language is more like a sixth

perceptual sense. He said that words do not only represent the world, but constitute and shape it, in the philosophical sense that our vision emigrates into the world. There is an intertwining, rather than a dichotomy, between the thing-presentation and the word-presentation, the world of perception and the world of words (Finlay, 2006; Freud, 1923; Merleau-Ponty, 1968).

Therapeutic listening is comparable with phenomenological practice in that both represent attempts to ‘return to the things themselves’ (Husserl, 1970/1936). How to meet the client without bias is an analogous concern for the humanistic therapist striving to understand the client in their own terms, rather than in terms of some external theory or discourse. A conversation can be understood, however, only because the listener brings his foreunderstanding, in the form of prejudice. According to Gadamer (1976) prejudice is a valuable resource that does not only foreclose understanding. It also offers an opportunity to open it up, by providing a bridge to the phenomenon, and the possibility of encountering it. Freud’s metaphor of the evenly suspended attention expresses the openness required for a genuine encounter: ‘For if [the therapist] follows his expectations he is in danger of never finding anything but what he already knows’ (Freud, 1912, p. 112). The counsellor first learns about their self, and how they limit their own capacity to listen (Cayne & Loewenthal, 2007; Folkes-Skinner, Elliott, & Wheeler, 2010). By engaging with their sedimented attitudes they may progressively bracket these in service of the client (Cooper, 2007; Fischer, 2009). According to Parsons, the empty quiescence, cleared of the listener’s micro-discourses, can offer a setting which operates differently from the reality outside: ‘We enter a theatre, a place of worship, or a children’s playground, we cross a boundary’ (Parsons, 2007). The boundary is between discourse that covers-up, and discourse that discloses being (Heidegger, 1962).

Phenomenological thinking after the discursive turn has attempted to redress the balance between understanding discourse as performative versus genuinely disclosive (e.g. Adams, 2010; Langdrige, 2007). This requires a horizontalisation—hearing the client as expert of their own experience. The speaker is heard as able to disclose another personal world that could radically affect the counsellors’ own subjectivity, not merely confirm it (Gadamer, 1976). This implies a different kind of listening and talking in therapeutic practice. The enquiry into how dialogue can be open is especially relevant for the participants of the present study attempting to reconcile empathic and interpretive counselling approaches. Smith (2007) has delineated the difference between a phenomenological interpretation and a psychoanalytic one, drawing on Ricoeur’s (1970) distinction between a hermeneutic of empathy and a hermeneutic of suspicion. He argued that both play a role in the ‘hybrid discourse’ of therapeutic conversations. Studying contemporary counselling education can contribute to this enquiry (e.g. Fragkiadaki et al, 2013; Georgiadou, 2014). In a detailed qualitative study of a single counselling student’s experience, Folkes-Skinner et al (2010) foregrounded the deconstruction of the counsellor’s self. The view that understanding is inseparable

from self-understanding is central to phenomenology and counselling practice (e.g. Giorgi, 2005; Stedmon & Dallos, 2009). Counsellors work principally through the medium of language, however, as Frank (2001, p.359) put it: ‘the problem of suffering is not how we know it, but how we encounter it’. The empirical data we present offer accounts of beginning counselling students lived experiences of listening, hearing, and genuinely encountering the other person.

Method

Participants

Ninety students who were completing the first year of a four-year part-time counselling Masters programme at a British university were invited to participate. The programme’s orientation is a dialogue between the person-centred approach with its roots in the Rogerian humanistic tradition, and psychodynamic perspectives combining classical and contemporary psychoanalytic theory and practice with British object relations. Further details of the programme and curriculum are available in (Authors removed for blind review). Research participation involved submitting video recordings of students’ listening practices and a semi-structured interview. The present study is a re-examination of transcripts of interviews that enquired into the listening practice component of the first year. Ten interviews were conducted in the original study, and of these six participant transcripts were re-analysed in detail according to the guidelines of the analytic method discussed later. They were four women and two men, age range 25-45 years old, established in various careers including social work, management consultancy, teaching, and finance, and were considering counselling as a second career. First year students were selected as they would be closer to the transition from ordinary to therapeutic conversations, as we were interested in their lived experiences of that boundary. These particular students requirement to dialogue between person-centred/phenomenological and psychodynamic/interpretive training orientations also provides a unique opportunity for mutual illumination between social science theory and therapeutic practice. The method of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith & Osborn, 2003) employed in this study is a unique match to these students’ double orientation, being itself based on a dialogue between interpretative and phenomenological philosophical stances. The methodology itself may as a result be informed by the concrete, lived experiences of the participants attempting to embody a similar reconciliation in their practice. Smith (2007) has argued for more research in the social sciences crossing the disciplines between theory and practice.

Ethics

The study had ethical approval from the Department of Psychology at The University of Edinburgh. The interviews were conducted by two researchers who were not directly involved in the education

of the students. Participants were made aware of the names and affiliations of the researchers and assured that the interviews would not be analysed by teaching staff who would occupy a significant assessment role in their training. All participants engaged in a process of informed consent before beginning the research.

Reflexivity

It is increasingly being acknowledged in phenomenological and hermeneutic psychological work that the experiential world of the researcher plays a part in constituting the phenomenon under enquiry. The importance of researcher bracketing is not to remove subjectivity, for that is not possible, rather it is to be aware of how subjectivity is enabling the phenomenon to appear (Giorgi, 1994). At the time of the analysis, the first author was engaging with his own ethnic minority and other differences in practice and supervision. In particular to explore meanings and possibilities around non-colonising conversations with others existentially different from ourselves, including culture, sexuality, language, and mother-tongue.

Procedure

Interviews lasted between 50 and 70 minutes and were conducted in either the department of Psychology or the department of Counselling and Psychotherapy. A semi-structured interview schedule was devised to guide the interview, and phenomenological principles were followed paying attention to openness, flexibility and lived experience, enabling further enquiry into interesting or unexpected possibilities emerging during the interview (Finlay, 2009; Langdrige, 2007). The interview invited participants to reflect on three main areas: (1) Whether their experience of listening to others had changed during the course and if so in what ways; (2) How they experienced the listening role and what listening meant for them; (3) Their personal experience and any turning points in the course through the year.

Analysis

The data from the original interviews were analysed using IPA. Returning to the original transcripts for a second-pass analysis it was possible to bracket the theme of ‘hearing the self’ that emerged from the original study (see Fischer, 2009). Bracketing this theme, the phenomenon of ‘hearing another’ could be disclosed. IPA offers a theorisation of the process in which the original thing, in this case the transcript, can appear different on a subsequent viewing. Indeed this is a core principle of a hermeneutic phenomenology – there is a hermeneutic circle between seeing and interpreting. Smith has articulated this dynamic in terms of the ‘appearing of the thing itself’, which is never final. The thing itself constantly shows and occludes itself in an interplay between its parts and

whole (Heidegger, 1962; Smith, 2007). We applied the method of IPA as follows: each transcript was read and reread to identify articulations specifically concerning hearing the other. Every instance of the meaning unit was underlined and recorded with notes in the left hand margin. Next these were clustered together according to conceptual similarities and each cluster was given a descriptive label that conveyed the quality of the experience staying close to the participant's own language as far as possible. The clusters were sorted into themes grouped by similarity and given labels, checking throughout that the theme descriptors reflected the participants' original meanings in the transcript. A table of themes was produced showing the major themes and subthemes capturing what hearing is like for that participant. The process was repeated for each participant, starting afresh with each transcript and bracketing preconceptions based on previous transcripts. Each of the three coders followed this process and met to compare their theme tables after each transcript. In the final stage, the tables of themes for all the transcripts were compared and a master table of overarching themes was constructed.

Results

Table 1 shows the themes and subthemes of participants' lived experiences. Three overarching themes on the phenomenon of hearing another were surfaced: Therapeutic openness, Hearing beyond discourse, and Presence.

Table 1 here.

Each theme consisted of a variety of subthemes shown in Table 1. Underlined text indicates the meaning units originally selected for analysis. The notation [...] indicates text removed for the sake of brevity and clarity in shining-out the theme. The notation [word] indicates that a word has been inserted into the extract to assist the speaker's original intended meaning.

1. Therapeutic Openness

"Once I realised not to do things, I couldn't replace those by things to do"

The participants understood openness as creating space for the other person. Central to this was developing silence in speech and behaviour. They described awareness of distracting and self-distracting facial and bodily gestures, postures and movements, and their impacts on the other. Opportunities provided by the course to scrutinise and to reflect on personal habits while listening created self-knowledge which translated into new agency while listening: To 'think in background mode', to distinguish events and feelings that emanated from the self, the other, and the

interpersonal dynamic between, a capacity for silence that consisted in allowing the other person to find their own words, a space to hear their story, and to try out ways of thinking and being without being judged. Therapeutic openness comprised four subthemes:

1.1 Silence

Participants articulated silence as being quiet, not doing, without agenda, and giving space. The apparent passivity could belie the heightened internal work and energy: thinking, sensing, collating information, and listening between the lines. Silence for Odette was a language and presence:

There's a language, I mean silence is its own language, I would say [...] Its not all about being quiet and its not all about being verbal either in your relationship with another person. Em, silence is, is often at once, well it's an outward sign like being verbal, but it's not, it's a, it's a presence, as words can, you know make your presence.

She draws attention to a quality of silence that is not merely the absence of speech, but a giving space for the other person to exist, and not clouding their talk with her own internal talk. She describes this as a 'choice' – choosing to 'stick with the person's material rather than your own'. Samantha understood openness as being with her speaker without agenda. It was refraining from advising, mentoring and from 'adding value' which were some ways she listened without openness in her previous professional role. Being present without doing involved going through a lived experience that was meaningful for her:

I went up and down quite a lot as I tried things out and I think there was a period when I was a bit bland. I wrote that word down in capitals, so it must mean something to me. Em, because, once I realised, not to do things, I couldn't replace those by things to do (laughs) [...] In the new listening, I'm not. I have no agenda. That's hugely interesting. I have absolutely no agenda, and I can actually, sit back and see what happens.

The juxtaposition of 'up and down' and 'bland' implies a complex wrestling with contradictions as a way of being that was not just another kind of doing. Her reflection 'once I realised not to do things, I couldn't replace those by things to do' conveys pithily a dilemma she resolved by going through a lived experience, emerging with something 'new' and 'hugely interesting'. This kind of silence was not a singular act of emptying the mind. It was an ongoing process of clearing space and of living and learning how to be with without doing to:

I don't know, it's more like listening to music if you know what I mean, than going to a movie. I know that might sound strange, but there's em (pause), there's a lot of stuff going on in your head.

(Samantha)

The long pause and the word 'strange' in the extract convey something of a mysterious quality to hearing.

1.2 Otherness

Some participants described openness in terms of an experience of otherness. In the next extract Samantha describes her own revelation of otherness:

I think I've become aware of other people's realities as well. I loved that phrase. Oh I picked it up from somewhere. Because I hadn't really given that enough thought [...] You know if someone's being apparently difficult, in their head they're not being difficult. In their world they're not being difficult, or if they're doing something which I think is completely mad, its not mad for them.

Openness for her was being able to sustain the other's difference without making them 'the same' or 'mad'. This required a degree of vigilance in distinguishing what is self and what is other in the listening response. Odette describes her vigilance towards 'being myself' versus 'being the same' or playing a role:

I'm much less likely to cloud the other person's situation [...] Or say: "Yeah I understand what you mean" but not really checking do I understand what you mean, or do I understand what I mean in reflection on what you're saying with, you know?

The distinction she draws between what she means and what the other person means opens up a critical distance allowing the otherness to assert itself against her interpretation. She elaborates in the next extract that making the other the same as myself, or conversely making myself the same as the other, are both no use at all:

There's a sense of mutuality em, that doesn't necessarily mean you have to be the same. So, my listening has to be at my pace, just as their talking has to be at their pace if you know what I mean? If I'm going to be effective I'm myself, essentially, because, if I'm not myself I'm no use at all, you know. If I'm not myself then who is it in the chair in the room, really?

The question 'who is it in the chair in the room' seems to go to the heart of her understanding of hearing another person.

1.3 Deconstruction of the self-image

The opportunity to scrutinise self-experiences between listening practices created an openness towards the self that could lead to a deconstruction of the self-image. In the next extract Samantha describes how she let go of her image of being right:

Because I, whereas before I would have debated (laughs) I wouldn't, in this environment I wouldn't debate. If someone says I don't like the way you said, that's rubbish or something like that, I wouldn't counter, counteract that.

You wouldn't defend yourself?

I wouldn't defend myself, no. No. That was it. I think it was not defending myself that was strange. So, there was no me trying to prove how right I was. It was eh. There, there, there was a sort of slight, I felt more vulnerable (pause).

Not counteracting or debating feedback about herself from peers and tutors was strange and she felt vulnerable without her familiar stance of being 'right'. There are pauses and hesitations in her speech which seem to embody her openness to new self-experience as she deconstructs familiar defences. Similarly, Chrissie understood being open as 'not escaping into a question':

I think, (pause) I was aware sort of last year, that I, that I quite often question. I'm really interested usually in what people bring, so I tend to sort of want just to make sure that what I've, hearing is ok. But I sometimes think I use it as an escape [...] So there might be a little bit of that, of woops I better say something now. But there might also be a wee, which I don't know but it, it, it might also be that if emotionally it's difficult, I, I keep in a, I keep in a safe place, which I don't want to do cause it's not really right at all and maybe go into my head. I don't know. (Chrissie)

She embodies her openness in the extract through a hesitancy of speech and repetitions of 'I don't know'. She is thinking afresh about herself in relation to her client, and what might happen if she can let go of her image of a 'safe place'.

1.4 Intentionality

Participants described attending to the total interpersonal communication while listening. An ability to ‘think in background mode’ was a crucial feature of openness:

I think when I’m listening, and talking less, I’m, I’m, looking out for things and trying to get a sense [...] My gut feel about what’s happening with what eh, with what I see. Em, I think the other big thing though is that em, (pause) reflect on how I’m feeling. So, what are my energy levels and feelings through, through the, the course of the interaction. (Robert)

His use of physical language ‘looking out’, ‘get a sense’, ‘gut feel’, and ‘energy levels’ conveys an understanding of his whole body as a listening instrument. Rosalind invokes a metaphor of different processes in her brain:

I think it involves two different sorts of processes going on at the same time. Cause one is to do with allowing yourself to be properly absorbed in what the other person is saying um, that, that, that you’re hearing the actual practical factual side of things and also getting some sense of how it’s feeling. So um, how it’s feeling for them and to an extent you’re, you’re using another bit of your brain, it feels like, to actually hold the information, to, to kind of um, what’s the word now, um, that you’re collating stuff effectively. That you’re sort of gathering information and sort of processing it as well so’s that you can um, kind of um, look it up you know, the broad sort of pattern of what the person’s saying and to have a sense as well of how, they’re experiencing that. (Rosalind)

The four subthemes reflect the participants’ experiences of openness as actively and intentionally maintained through on-going self and other scrutiny. This reflexivity was linked with a willingness to deconstruct and to bracket aspects of the self, allowing the other person to show their selves in their own light.

2. Hearing Beyond Discourse

“There’s something about now things lingering with me”

Listeners described hearing beyond their talkers’ speech content. They used a variety of metaphors to express hidden, oblique, and concealed meanings that they began to hear in their listening practices. Three subthemes captured how the participants understood their developing capacity to hear beyond their speakers’ words:

2.1 Tuning into themes

Samantha noticed herself take a step back and observe the broader picture. She began to ‘spot things’:

I don’t think I had to work too much on empathy, um, because that’s always been one of my sort of strengths in my old work. Em, I don’t know [where] this is quite taking me (pause). But there was, there was something else. I started to tune into themes. Things started to mean more to me. I think because of all the reading, and all the thinking and all the talking, I would spot things that people were saying.

For example?

Em, for example, someone who seems to always want to be in control of things. Rather than listening to the content of what they were saying, I was absolutely, I was observing that broader picture, yeah, rather than the specific.

Odette spoke of ‘trust’ several times in her interview. The next extract illustrates how even in a maelstrom she trusts that what is significant for her talker will re-emerge of its own accord:

If it’s very urgent and there’s a lot of thought and talk all at the same time [...] it would be: “Well, the most important bits I can’t decide.” The other person has to decide in their own pace, and, and it would most likely be something that’s repeated again or come back to or, whether it’s said in exactly the same words or just. It’s this theme that comes up again or the suggestion of a, of a themed reflection.

The extracts show how the listeners broadened their hearing, collecting up and collating the speakers’ utterances over time into themes. They described attending to the whole pattern of what the person is saying, and not saying.

2.2 Attending to the emotion

Participants described giving importance to the feelings and emotions attendant on their talkers’ words. Chrissie understood emotions as showing the ‘relevance of the story’:

I think it’s important that you do understand their story [...] But I think it would be really wrong to ignore, the emotional bit cause it’s that bit that tells you the relevance of that story to that person I suppose, and it gives you a real insight as to how they might be feeling regarding that story. Em, so, in some ways I feel that, it’s almost dare I say it, almost more important.

The feelings show the continuing impact on the person's experiencing and indicate something beyond the story that they are still needing to attend to. She captures the essence of this subtheme in a decisive question later in the transcript: 'Why is the person needing to bring that story?'

2.3 Becoming aware of when a story affects me

Noticing how she is emotionally affected by her talker's story held further potential information:

There's something about now things in their own way, kind of lingering with me. They don't, it's not just: "Well bye then I'm off" and, as it might have been before. It's like I'll really, sometimes linger, or things'll stay in my head much more, than ever before.

Lingering could be an unexplained feeling, as when later in the interview she says: 'I think sometimes I'm feeling a sadness that they are maybe blocking.' She is curious about possible meanings of the lingering in terms of what the other person might be experiencing, and not experiencing.

2.4 Lifting the lid on language

Participants understood hearing as revealing covered-up meanings. Samantha used a metaphor of 'getting underneath the stuff':

Trying to get underneath some of the stuff, you know? Because sometimes there's stuff there that sounds just like stuff but it's actually really important. Like someone can throw in a throw away line like, "Oh well that doesn't really matter because they're always like that." But that could actually mean quite a lot. So your head's going "Hey, I think that means quite a lot" because of something I picked up in the last session. So you're processing that, and yet you're still having to listen to the next half a dozen sentences. (Samantha)

Similarly, Odette explains how words can become outdated, no longer true, but still exert a grip. She describes her task in the next extract as 'lifting the lid':

You'll get a sense of hh. when the point comes to move down a level, to you know, lift the lid, go down to a different layer of ok so (pause) on an emotional level and a psychological but of, how does, how are you feeling, what, what feelings does it bring up and, and (pause) as such, by focussing on feelings you, you get a lot of thought as well.

Both extracts convey a sense of getting underneath talk. A throw-away line is heard as being potentially decisive, and moving to the feelings that go with the talk can put the speaker in contact with live existential issues. Hearing beyond discourse, as reflected by the four subthemes, was an interplay between meaning synthesis: collecting-up and collating disparate utterances, and meaning analysis: disclosing their subtexts to uncover the existential situation.

3. Presence

“Its meaningful for you both engaged in that moment”

The final theme captures participants’ understandings of hearing as a way of being present with the other person. The subthemes reflect a quality of being-with without doing-to the other person.

3.1 Meeting: ‘It’s meaningful for you both’

The following extract shows the listener and talker mutually engaged in a situation that is meaningful for both. Odette articulates her understanding:

Though your “role”, in inverted commas, might be as listener you’re, you’re also there as just a companion with them on their, on their path of processing, em, processing thoughts and emotions and past events and you know just em (pause) new things that might pop-up for them, and particularly, em, things that would come up for them in relation to you as a listener so, that would, that would be new.

She describes her talker as bringing forth new language ‘in relation’ to the listener. These she says are not ‘past and practised strings of words’. The words are ‘meaningful in that present moment’. As she later puts it ‘It’s in the telling that the work get’s done.’

3.2 The present moment: ‘She needs to speak about it now’

There is an urgency in the present moment in talking and listening. Reflecting on a listening practice session she says her talker ‘needs to speak about it now’:

She’s needing to speak about it now, but it is a story, as in it’s material that she’s familiar with [...] So she’s going back into her past, but she’s, she’s here in her present and looking forward as in, well these things are still here. Later on she, she, she talks about some of the feelings that still exist, are still latent in some way and that she’s still aware of and, and so, you know she’s going backwards, she’s going. While she’s being in, in her present she’s looking perhaps forwards as in well: “What does this mean for me now in my future?” And perhaps also looking to, to, to both sides and going well: “Should I be looking over my shoulder?”

The vivid image of ‘looking forwards, backwards, and to both sides’ shows the issue is live and present. The extract conveys the speaker’s urgency in needing to make sense of her present while reconstructing her past and projecting a future. She is looking forward and looking back, words are familiar yet resonate differently, as ‘old thought language’ appears in ‘new lights’ and are no longer true. These inform, as Odette puts it ‘the essentials: who she is, what she wants, what she looks for’.

3.3 Holistic connection: ‘Not just words and hearing and speech’

In the final subtheme participants described offering a ‘holistic connection’ that was more than words and hearing and speech:

I think it’s just a, a key way of helping people to um, understand themselves, to um, to, to develop ways of looking at things. Maybe sometimes changing their ways of looking at things, um, of developing some of their strengths and insights about how they are in the world and how the world is um. For trying out opportunities to make you try out sorts of understanding things and em, I think, I think it’s got a huge therapeutic value if it’s done, done well and it can, it can help people to, to really move on and um, change the way that they, they live. (Rosalind)

Notice her choice of language in terms of opportunities to develop ‘how they are in the world’ and the potential to ‘change the way that they live’. Listening is an active collaboration in trying out together a different way of seeing and being in the world.

The theme we have called Presence is an existential availability that was ‘not just words and hearing and speech’. There is an ongoing relating where prototypes of possible future selves are being tried out with another person. Together listener and talker develop ways of looking and seeing how things may be different. The participants’ understandings of the therapeutic, captured by the three themes articulated, extend beyond the classical model of the talking cure as principally deciphering historical trauma and archaic meanings.

Discussion

The themes explicated above captured participants’ lived experiences of their developing capacity to hear in the therapeutic sense. Reik (1954) used the concept of a ‘third ear’ to refer to the capacity to hear beyond the client’s talk to what in the life is in need of healing. The present study provides concrete particulars and lived experiences to flesh-out the concept of the third ear and therapeutic hearing. The theme we have called Hearing Beyond Discourse, surfaced in the present study,

connects with psychotherapeutic understandings of the therapist as instrument, in tune with the client's total communication via all the sensory channels and the bodily felt sense (Gendlin, 2003; Isakower, 1963). Participants in the present study described aspects of vari-focal attention in their listening: picking up repetitions, multi-vocalities, and diachronic meanings established over time, ritual and custom. Hearing the emotional part of the story could disclose both archaic and real desires being 'smuggled into discourse' (Cornforth, 2010, p.172). These meanings required uncovering, as one participant reflected it was her task to 'lift the lid on language' to enable her talker to move from discourse into feeling and being.

The theme we have called Therapeutic Openness provides concrete particulars on the principle of openness. Finlay (2009) has observed that the matter of precisely how to practise openness is notably absent from the research literature. The counselling students in the present study developed openness through awareness of silence, otherness, deconstruction of the self-image, and intentionality. Their openness extended to the gaps between words, into the parts of their talkers' speech that lacked referents. These absent presences beyond discourse illuminate what Gurevich (2008) called the 'negative imprint of absence' the invisible, life dis-affirming track that has brought the client to counselling. Similarly, Frosh (2010) has described the murmurs, the undersides of words, and the need to attend to the non-discursive and pre-discursive, as well as to discourse. Therapeutic hearing opened up a critical distance between speaking and being that allowed a space for the talker to exist other than as the 'cultural dope' who is habitually *spoken by* their discourse (Garfinkel, 1963). The open space, uncolonized by established discourses, enables the person to *speak*, when called for, by lived experience. In practice this did not amount to seeking after some 'thing' underneath words – as if the authentic person were inside the container of the body. Rather it was a putting aside of 'old word strings' to enable new thought language. Gendlin's analogy of poetry without the aesthetic requirement offers a conceptualisation of therapeutic dialogues as creating fresh language that speaks new being into existence (Gendlin, 2003; Wilberg, 2004). The phenomenon of the meeting here is not a replay of cultural discourses, or merely a 'discursive re-positioning' in the social constructionist sense (Besley, 2002; Winslade, 2005).

The theme Presence captured a quality of encountering the other person without performance. According to Tannen and Daniels (2010), counsellor presence has received little attention in the literature despite being a key concept. In the present study the participants articulated their experience of presence as including a quality of urgency in the meeting that was live and unrehearsed. The other person 'needs to speak' and the encounter is 'meaningful for you both'. The dialogical existentialism of Buber (1929) described meeting as including a quality of grace that is essentially mysterious. The *I-Thou* encounter alludes to an inter-human realm in which the other person ceases to be a thing among things in a utilisable world. They have the potential to transform

the ground of reality. Analogous meetings in the psychotherapeutic literature have been called ‘present moments’ (Boston Change Process Study Group, 2010). The related concept of ‘maieutic’ listening offers a metaphor of counsellor presence as existential midwife, guardian of new life coming into being (Wilberg, 2004). In this capacity the therapist holds the charge that builds up between words by not speaking prematurely. In the present study one participant described her speaker going beyond past and practised strings of words to speak anew, creating new thought-language.

Limitations

A limitation of the study is that the counselling students interviewed may have performed some answers in anticipation of the researchers’ expectations. As part of the process of informed consent, however, participants were assured that the interviewers would not be staff occupying a significant assessment role in their course. The live quality of their meaning-making, evident in the extracts, suggests that they were thinking afresh and speaking from lived experience, rather than rehearsing or performing a script. The analysis we have presented represents a dialogue with their transcripts around the achievement of hearing. The phenomenon of hearing thus disclosed is a re-awakening of meaning in the Gadamerian sense, rather than a claim to originary meanings. The latter would require a different hermeneutic methodology including ongoing dialogues with the speaker, not only their text, as occurs in actual psychotherapy and counselling.

Conclusion

Beginning counselling students’ accounts of their listening practices were used to disclose themes on hearing another person, at a boundary in their development. Hearing was a holding of fragments of language, absence, hesitations, and silences, collected over time, and surfaced as new diachronic meanings in on-going conversational spaces. Their attempts at meaning collection and collation, from within the speaker’s lifeworld, offer concrete examples of the principle of openness put into practice. Reflection with others on the course offered the students opportunities for what has been called suspicion: to bring the speaker’s lived meanings into contact with external discourses and theory. The participants of the study embodied a complex reconciliation between the different hermeneutics of empathy and interpretation in their developing practice.

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